



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

# GAIN Report

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## United Kingdom

### Biotechnology

### UK Minister re-opens biotech debate

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**Report Highlights:**

Citing drivers such as rising food prices and food shortages in the world's poorest countries, the UK government is reportedly ready to argue for a greater role for genetically modified crops. Following preliminary discussions with UK biotech companies, Environment Minister Mr. Phil Woolas has called for a debate on the role that GM crops may play in alleviating global food price rises.

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## Background

The recent rise in global food prices, and the implications for animal feed, has caused concern for policy makers at the EU level and throughout European Member States. The current attention on the price of agricultural commodities has added a new dimension to the public debate on the use of biotechnology in food and agricultural products.

## UK developments

Citing drivers such as rising food prices and food shortages in the world's poorest countries, the UK government is reportedly ready to argue for a greater role for genetically modified crops. Following preliminary talks earlier this week with the UK's Agricultural Biotechnology Council (comprised of representatives from Monsanto, Bayer CropSciences, BASF, Dow AgroSciences, Pioneer/Dupont and Syngenta) the UK's Environment Minister Mr. Phil Woolas called for a domestic debate on the benefits of GM crops.

Mr. Woolas briefed The Independent newspaper: *"There is a growing question of whether GM crops can help the developing world out of the current food price crisis. It is a question that we as a nation need to ask ourselves. The debate is already under way. Many people concerned about poverty in the developing world and the environment are wrestling with this issue."*

In addition, it is reported that an unnamed UK minister told another newspaper: *"With the current problems, the first priority must be to increase food production. That means we must reopen the debate on GM. The green groups won't like it but we will have to take them on."*

After organizations such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace attacked his remarks, Prime Minister Gordon Brown's office was obliged to defend Mr. Woolas: *"It has always been the government's position, and continues to be the government's position, that GM crops could offer a range of benefits over the longer term."*

In 2004, after a heated public debate, the government decided there was no scientific case for a blanket ban on GM crops. However, to allay consumer fears, it was decided that commercial production would be allowed on a case-by-case basis, only if evidence showed that it would not pose a risk to human health or the environment. There are no GM crops being grown in Britain and just one trial is taking place – of genetically modified potatoes in Cambridgeshire.

The strength of the comments made by the UK Ministers is bound to stir up the debate once again in the UK. That said, the UK government is treading carefully, aware that strong government support for GM crops may provoke a backlash by opponents. Those Ministers who favor a renewed push argue that Britain has a duty to take another look at this issue on the grounds that boosting production is the best way to reduce global food prices.